

A Study of Factors that Influence Teachers to Become School Administrators

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Abstract

Attracting and retaining highly qualified school leaders is becoming increasingly important in our nation. The purpose of this study was to identify factors that motivate or inhibit practicing teachers from seeking administrative positions. Using exploratory factor analysis, survey responses of 329 students enrolled in Master of School Administration programs were analyzed. The findings indicated that factors such as Challenge, Altruism, Personal/Professional Benefit/Gain, and Leadership Influence motivate teachers to transition into administration, whereas factors such as Insufficient Gain/Personal Benefit, Personal Needs/Issues, and Increased Risk inhibit teachers from becoming administrators. Conclusions and implications of these findings were examined.

Introduction

As the list of problems faced by our nation's schools and school districts continues to grow, local school leaders are expected to know and accomplish more than at any previous time in our nation's history (Cuban, 2003; Donaldson, 2001; English, 2005). Many educators believe that without astute leadership from competent school principals, efforts to surmount the challenges in today's schools will not succeed (Gates, Ross, & Brewer, 2000; McEwan, 2003).

Unfortunately, attracting and retaining highly qualified principals is becoming increasingly difficult (Jones, 2001; Simon & Newman, 2004). Principal shortages are being reported at the elementary, middle, and secondary levels in many parts of the nation (Fenwick, 2000). National surveys conducted by the Educational Research Service (2000) and the Institute of Educational

Leadership (2000) indicate that as many as one-half of all urban, suburban, and rural school districts report shortages of qualified applicants for principal positions. While many principals are reaching retirement age, fewer young teachers are choosing career paths that lead to administrative positions (Simon & Newman, 2004; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006-2007). In addition, many administrators and teachers are reporting that the job of principal is simply no longer “doable” (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Harris, Arnold, Carr, Lowery, & Worsham, 2004). Why are fewer teachers pursuing the principalship? This study attempts to identify motivators and inhibitors that impact teachers’ decisions to seek administrative positions.

Literature Review

Several research efforts have uncovered factors that contribute to or detract from a person’s motivation to become a school administrator. Harris, Arnold, Lowery, and Crocker’s (2000) investigation of 151 students enrolled in principal preparation programs at four universities revealed that the primary factor contributing to these students’ decision to become school leaders was their desire to have an impact on the lives of students. Harris et al. (2000) also found that increased paperwork and threats of litigation were significant reasons not to become a principal. Research by the Educational Research Service (1998, 2000) found that school district superintendents who had served as principals cited insufficient compensation, stressful and time-consuming responsibilities, and difficulties with parents and other facets of society as the most significant deterrents to becoming administrators. Later studies by Moore (2000) and Pounder and Merrill (2001) found that people’s desire to become a principal was largely a function of their desire to make a difference in educational settings, their attraction to the personal and professional challenges of the principalship, and their perceived ability to initiate change. One large-scale study (Harris et al., 2004) found similar characteristics among 251 elementary, middle, and high school principals in three states – a strong desire to make a positive impact/difference and an attraction to the personal/professional challenges of the job. The current study sought to update these findings by identifying the relative influence of possible motivators and inhibitors that impact teachers’ decisions to become school leaders.

Methods

Participants

Three-hundred and fifty-seven students enrolled in a Master of School Administration degree program in one of eleven public institutions of higher education in North Carolina were asked to complete a survey (see Appendix) designed to determine factors that had recently influenced their decision to become school administrators. Of the 357 students asked to complete the survey, 329 completed and returned their surveys for a return rate of 92%.

Procedures

The 3-part survey used to determine the views of the highly qualified teachers toward becoming school administrators was a modification of an existing survey created by Harris et al. (2000). Part I solicited biographical and school demographic information. Part II asked respondents to evaluate 14 items that had potentially motivated them to become administrators. Part III prompted respondents to evaluate 17 items that had potentially deterred them from becoming school administrators. Parts II and III were constructed based on literature regarding motivators and inhibitors for public school principalship (Educational Research Service, 1998, 2000; Harris et al., 2000; Harris et al., 2004; Moore, 2000; Pounder & Merrill, 2001). Respondents evaluated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 - no importance; 2 - little importance; 3 - some importance; 4 - great importance) each item with respect to her or his decision to pursue a career as an administrator.

Results

Data collected in Part I of the survey revealed that 62% of the respondents had taught fewer than 9 years before enrolling in a Master of School Administration degree program. Only 5% had taught more than 20 years, while 32% had taught between 10 and 19 years. With respect to previous experience, 1% were from pre-schools, 50% were from elementary schools, 24% were from middle school schools, and 25% were from high school schools. Sixty-six percent had earned only a bachelor's degree, whereas 30% had previously earned a master's degree. Sixty-three percent of the respondents were female. Most respondents (60%) were seeking an Assistant Principal position

immediately after completing their degree program, whereas 35% desired to become Principals immediately after earning their M.S.A. degrees.

Figure 1 (Appendix A) illustrates the percent of time the respondents rated each of the 14 potential motivators to becoming school administrators as “some importance” or “great importance.” Figure 2 (Appendix A) illustrates the percent of time the respondents rated each of the 17 potential inhibitors to becoming school administrators as “some importance” or “great importance.”

An exploratory factor analysis was used to evaluate the structure of the 14 motivators and 17 inhibitors included on the survey and to determine the existence of any correlated subscale factors. A principal components method was used as the extraction method. The decrease in eigenvalues (i.e., scree test) leveled off at four factors for the motivator groups and three factors for the inhibitors, each with an eigenvalue greater than 1.0. The total variance accounted for by the seven factors was 56%. Pattern coefficients greater than .43 were used to determine relationships between the items and the factors. Using the literature regarding motivators and inhibitors for public school principalship (Educational Research Service, 1998, 2000; Harris et al., 2000; Harris et al., 2004; Moore, 2000; Pounder & Merrill, 2001), each factor was inspected for possible common themes among the items that loaded on the factor.

The factors, corresponding items, and statistical outcomes for the motivators and inhibitors are presented in Table 1. The factor analysis pattern coefficients yielding the seven factors are presented in Tables 2 and 3. The results of the factor analysis indicate that motivation and inhibition to become school administrators are not unidimensional constructs. The factor analytic findings suggest that the motivation for principalship has four underlying dimensions: (a) *Challenge*; (b) *Altruism*; (c) *Personal/Professional Benefit/Gain*; and (d) *Leadership/Influence*. In addition, inhibition for seeking principalship has three underlying dimensions: (a) *Insufficient Gain and/or Personal Benefit*; (b) *Personal Needs/Issues*; and (c) *Increased Risk*.

Conclusions and Implications

Attracting and retaining highly qualified school administrators is becoming increasingly important in our nation. Understanding the factors

Table 1

The Seven Factors and Corresponding Items for Motivators and Inhibitors

	Factors	Items		Percent of Variance	
Motivators	Personal/ Professional Benefit/Gain	m1-increased salary and fringe benefits m8-stepping stone to higher position m9-prestige and status m10-relocate to a more desirable location m13-increased freedom in daily routine m14-leave the classroom	3.123	22.307	22.307
	Altruism	m2-positive impact on people m6-ability to initiate change m11-desire to make a difference	2.437	17.406	39.712
	Challenge	m3-personal challenge m4-professional challenge	1.206	8.612	48.324
	Leadership/ Influence	m5-teacher of teachers m7-support and encouragement from others m12-influence over staffing	1.109	7.921	56.245
Inhibitors	Increased Risk	i6-pressures from standardized tests i7-potential litigation i10-longer year i11-isolation/alienation from staff i12-discipline problems i13-distance from students i14-fear of failure i15-outside groups influencing answers i17-requirements of No Child Left Behind legislation	7.154	42.082	42.082
	Insufficient Gain and/or Personal Benefit	i1-salary differential too small i2-no tenure-lack of security i3-increased commitments i4-paperwork/bureaucracy i5-lack of autonomy	1.416	8.329	50.411
	Personal Needs/ Issues	i8-desire to relocate i9-concerns for personal safety i16-discouraged by family/friends	1.032	6.068	56.479

that motivate or inhibit practicing teachers from seeking administrative positions is essential. This study suggests that factors such as *Challenge*, *Altruism*, *Personal/Professional Benefit/Gain*, and *Leadership Influence* motivate teachers to transition into administration, whereas factors such as *Insufficient Gain/Personal Benefit*, *Personal Needs/Issues*, and *Increased Risk* inhibit teachers from becoming administrators.

Table 2

Principal Component Analysis Extracting Four Motivator Components

	Personal/Professional Benefit/Gain	Altruism	Challenge	Leadership/ Influence
m10	.691			
m9	.664			
m14	.640			
m1	.617			
m8	.580			
m13	.549			
m11		.779		
m2		.749		
m6		.656		
m4			.862	
m3			.854	
m12				.750
m7				.536
m5				.532

Note: Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization; Rotation Converged in 5 Iterations.

Table 3

Principal Component Analysis Extracting Three Inhibitor Components

	Increased Risk	Insufficient Gain and/or Personal Benefit	Personal Needs/Issues
i14	.728		
i11	.721		
i15	.687		
i17	.609	.426	
i12	.605		
i10	.545		
i16	.541		.533
i13	.427		
i2		.728	.418
i3		.706	
i4	.446	.687	
i5		.671	
i1		.615	
i6	.472	.513	
i7	.488	.491	
i8			.705
i9			.701

Note: Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization; Rotation Converged in 5 Iterations.

School officials hoping to fill administrative vacancies from the present teaching corps need to tap into the motivations driving the career decision-making processes of young educators. This study suggests a hierarchy of motivations operating in the respondents. Foremost among these motivators is a drive to experience *challenges* in their lives in both the personal and professional realms. The perception of administrative work being arduous, unpredictable, and transient may resonate with these teachers who may be thinking that teaching the same subjects year after year has become repetitive. Marketing materials could stress the quest for accomplishing hard fought victories and overcoming entrenched obstacles on the journey towards success.

Altruism is another motivating factor for the respondents in this study. The respondents feel that they have the ability to initiate effective change in their organizations in order to have a positive impact on others. The respondents also desire to make a positive difference. As a result, work settings that include vision-setting and institutional improvement processes would be appealing to altruistic new administrators. Recruitment activities could contain themes which emphasize the district's needs for launching improvement efforts in professional development and student achievement. These themes can be expressed in written notices accompanying job postings and reinforced during the interview process. Candidates then would find the type of work setting match they were seeking; one in which they can exercise their desire to pursue positive change and have a positive impact on others.

As additional motivators, respondents cite *personal/professional benefits* such as increased compensation, positional advancement, and enhanced prestige and status. These motivators are part of an initial administrative job package and are not performance dependent at the beginning of one's employment. While entry-level administrative positions may not differ significantly from the salary levels of parallel teachers, the gateway to both line and staff administrative advancement is breeched and holds potential for vast enhancement of income and prestige in future years. Such ascent brings about possibilities for job relocation, increased freedom in daily routine, and the vitality that lies beyond the four walls of the teacher's classroom.

The final set of motivators delves into the concepts of *leadership and influence*. Respondents have been surrounded by teachers throughout their lives and have developed evaluative antennae towards their colleagues. The

opportunity to influence and hopefully induce improvement across a school's staff is appealing to the new administrator. The transition from directing student learning to designing professional development is an upgrade towards having larger impact through others.

In essence, the motivators describe a yearning inside the respondents to expand or enhance their impact on their chosen field of education. They have self-confidence in their own abilities which surpass the daunting challenges which lie ahead. Their quest may be part problem-solving and part purpose-finding.

This study also reveals three sets of items that inhibit teachers from moving into administrative roles. The first set is *insufficient gain or personal benefit* from making the teacher-to-administrator transition. Meager salary differential, loss of tenure security, and increased job commitments are framed with the negative aspects of increased paperwork, dealing with bureaucracy, and lack of autonomy. The combination of these items creates a strong disincentive to pursue administrative careers. They speak to the difficulty of being successful as an administrator – the “doableness” of the job. School districts can thwart the meager salary differentials by seeking talented professionals earlier in their careers before they ascend too highly on the salary schedule. The use of technology may mitigate the paperwork load and site-based decision-making can flatten the bureaucratic structure.

The second set of inhibitors deals with *personal needs and issues* such as required relocation and concerns for personal safety. Respondents also indicate that they had received discouragement from family members or friends. These inhibitors bring into play increased stress not only for the individual but also for the individual's family support unit. They tap into rudimentary health and security needs of those contemplating career changes. Hiring school districts need to respond by acknowledging that their new employees are connected to a family support group that requires attention also. Programs that include spousal activities, child-caring services, or educational enrichment tap into the family needs of a new administrator. These programs may range from simple social get-togethers to more formal opportunities like employment possibilities, enhanced health care benefits, and access to personal financial counseling services.

The final inhibitor factor is the perceived *increase in job risks* associated with entering administrative posts. Such issues as pressure from standardized

test results, potential litigation, a longer work year, possible isolation or alienation from staff, and student discipline problems are perceived as liabilities that threaten success. The inevitable distancing from students is seen as a negative aspect of administrative life. While the respondents may have been successful teachers, contemplating the more complex realm of administration introduces fear of failure sentiments. Finally, the perceived influences of external decision-makers and legislative mandates complete the amalgam of inhibitors. To lessen these concerns, school districts can develop focused and needs-driven in-service programs for their administrative staff. Visionary leadership from the superintendent's office and the Board of Education can marshal the necessary resources to accomplish this professional support system. The blending of new administrator's ideas and questions with the experience of more senior staff members can forge an effective partnership for mutual benefit.

Taken as a whole, the inhibitors serve to alert young educators of the pitfalls associated with the role of practicing administrators. The old adage, *buyer beware*, may have applicability to one contemplating career change decisions. School districts should be cognizant of the inhibitors so that they can be mitigated where possible through such actions as better compensation, professional development assistance, and enhanced organizational support systems. This will require visionary leadership adjustments at the top of the organization. The district's leaders will have to initiate the redistribution of resources to attract, support, and nurture new administrators to increase their chances for success. The old cost of a new administrator was measured by the position's salary and benefit package. High turn-over costs or the costs of failure were not calculated but the avoidance of these costs may serve as the vault from which the suggested supportive programs can be funded. School districts facing administrative turn-over and low supplies of interested job-seekers would do well to better understand the underlying motivational factors involved and enter into mutually supportive partnerships with aspiring administrators.

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Appendix A

Figure 1
Motivators for Becoming a School Administrator

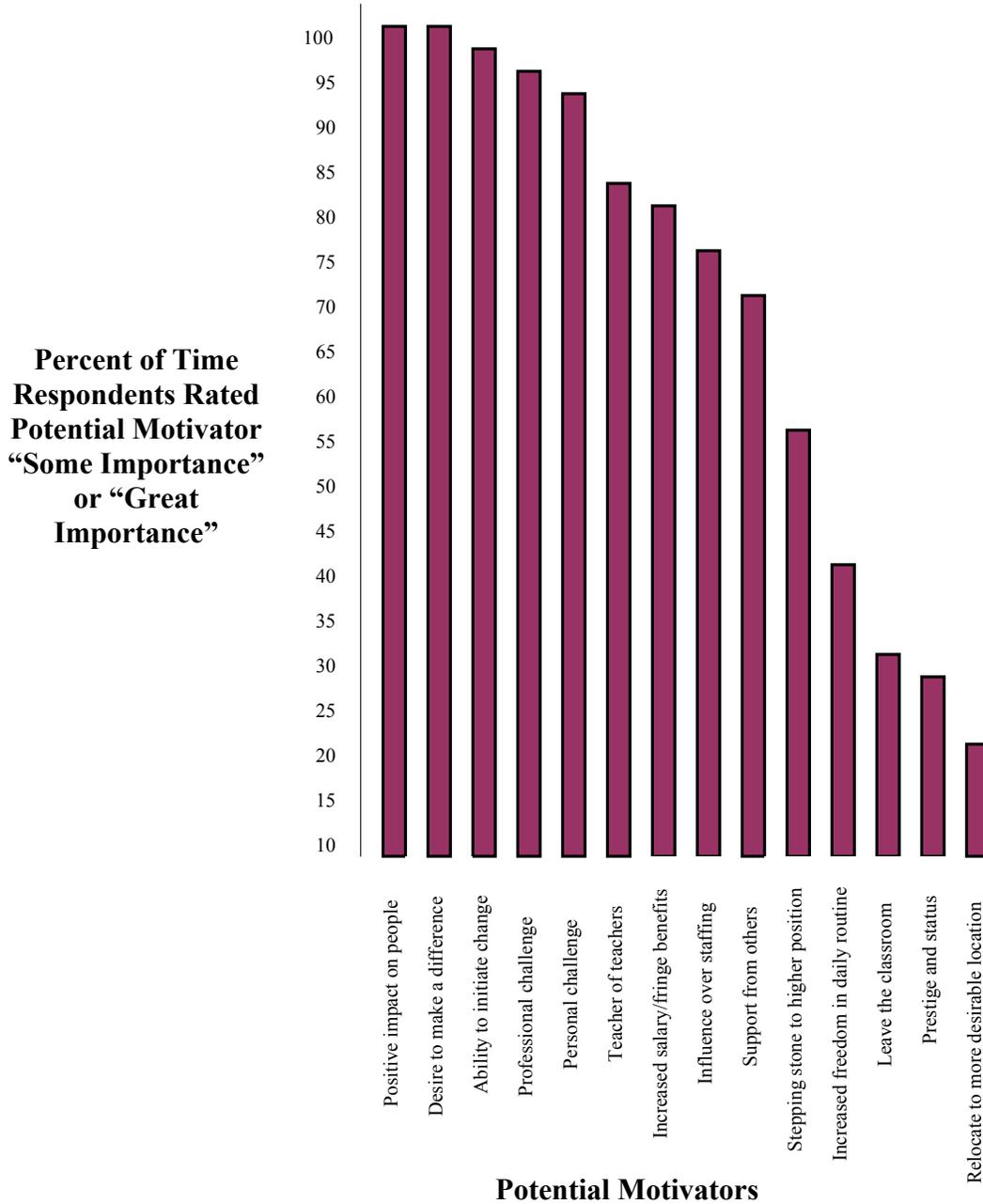
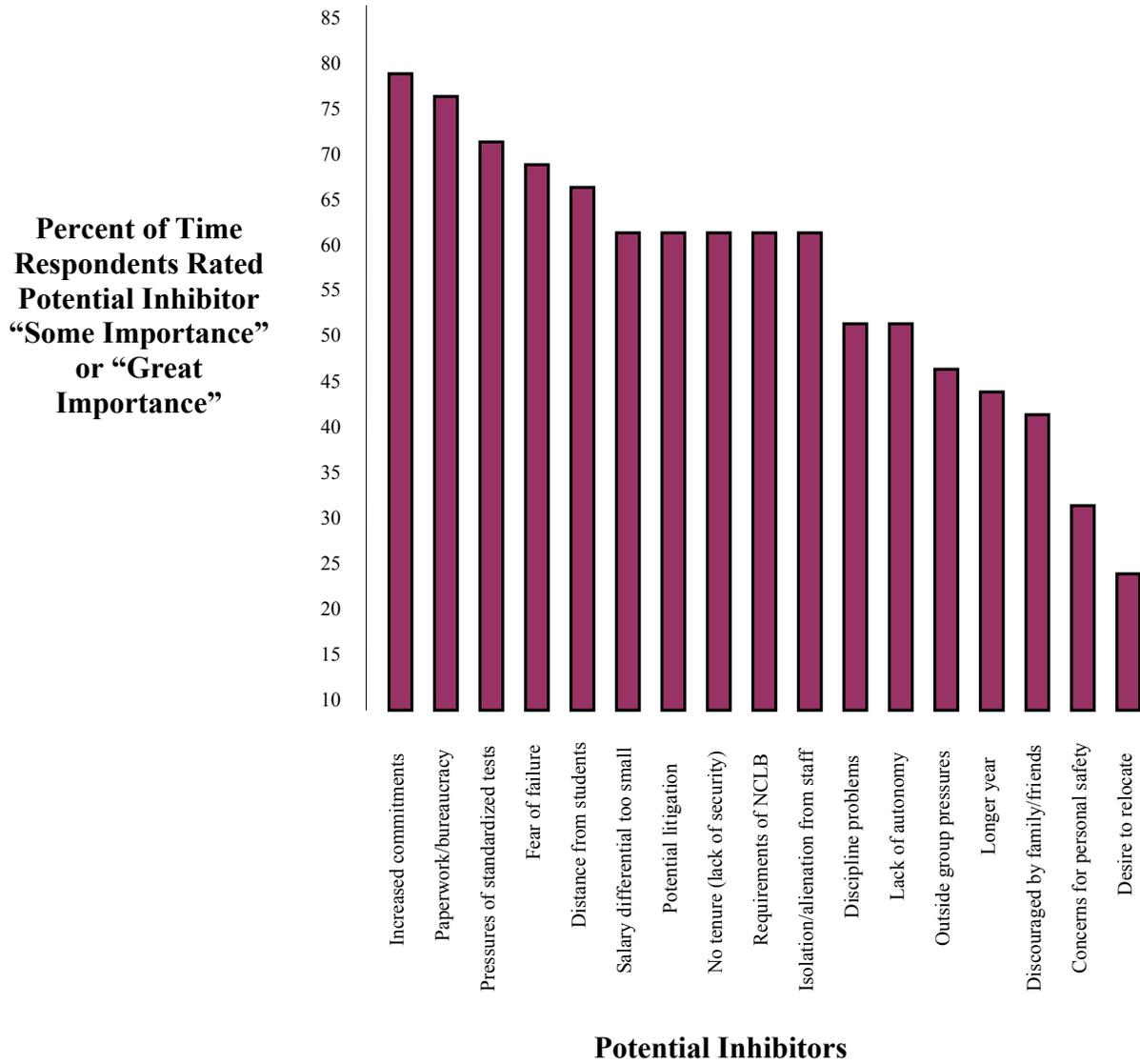


Figure 2
Inhibitors to Becoming a School Administrator



Appendix B

Survey

Part I. Background Information

How many years did you serve as a teacher before entering the MSA degree program?

4-9 years 10-14 years 15-19 years 20+ years

In which area have you had the most experience?

Preschool Elementary Middle High School

What is your highest degree?

Bachelor's Degree Master's Degree Other: _____

What college or university are you currently attending while working on your MSA degree? _____

What is your sex? Male Female

What position are you most interested in seeking when you complete your MSA degree program?

Principal Assistant Principal Other: _____

Part II. Motivators

Below are motivating issues that may potentially encourage teachers to pursue a career as a school administrator. From your perspective, circle "1" for no importance, "2" for little importance, "3" for some importance, and "4" for great importance.

	Importance			
	None	Little	Some	Great
1. Increased salary and fringe benefits	1	2	3	4
2. Positive impact on people	1	2	3	4
3. Personal challenge	1	2	3	4
4. Professional challenge	1	2	3	4
5. Teacher of teachers	1	2	3	4
6. Ability to initiate change	1	2	3	4
7. Support and encouragement from others	1	2	3	4
8. Stepping stone to higher position	1	2	3	4
9. Prestige and status	1	2	3	4
10. Relocate to a more desirable location	1	2	3	4
11. Desire to make a difference	1	2	3	4
12. Influence over staffing	1	2	3	4
13. Increased freedom in daily routine	1	2	3	4
14. Leave the classroom	1	2	3	4

Part III. Inhibitors

Below are inhibiting issues that may potentially discourage teachers from pursuing a career as a school administrator. From your perspective, circle “1” for no importance, “2” for little importance, “3” for some importance, and “4” for great importance.

	Importance			
	None	Little	Some	Great
1. Salary differential too small	1	2	3	4
2. No tenure (lack of security)	1	2	3	4
3. Increased commitments (meetings, longer days, etc.)	1	2	3	4
4. Paperwork/bureaucracy	1	2	3	4
5. Lack of autonomy	1	2	3	4
6. Pressures from standardized tests	1	2	3	4
7. Potential litigation	1	2	3	4
8. Desire to relocate	1	2	3	4
9. Concerns for personal safety	1	2	3	4
10. Longer year	1	2	3	4
11. Isolation/alienation from staff	1	2	3	4
12. Discipline problems	1	2	3	4
13. Distance from students	1	2	3	4
14. Fear of failure	1	2	3	4
15. Outside groups influencing your answers	1	2	3	4
16. Discouraged by family/friends	1	2	3	4
17. Requirements of No Child Left Behind legislation	1	2	3	4